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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Techniques for Teaching Vocabulary

Diane August, Ph.D. • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English learners

Practice: Teach Vocabulary

Highlights (short version):

- Importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension
- Issues in teaching vocabulary to ELs: background knowledge; literacy in first language
- Strategies for teaching individual words: pre-teaching selected words; attention to different types of words (basic words; rich, nuanced words; words and phrases for understanding connected text), and examples from current and previous work, including the Vocabulary Improvement Project
- Vocabulary teaching strategies for older children (more technical and academic vocabulary taught in context of instruction; use of glossaries)
- Strategies to learn words: examples from the cognate intervention program for third and fifth graders; inferring meaning from context; teaching to promote depth of word knowledge

About the Interviewee

Diane August, Ph.D. is currently a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics as well as a consultant located in Washington DC. She is the Principal Investigator for a large federally-funded study investigating the development of literacy in English-language learners, Co-Principal

Investigator for a federally-funded randomized evaluation of English immersion and transitional bilingual programs, and Co-Principal Investigator at the National Research and Development Center on English-language Learners. She was Staff Director for the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. She has been a Senior Program Officer at the National Academy of Sciences where she was study director for the Committee on Developing a Research Agenda on the Education of Limited English Proficient and Bilingual Students. Dr. August has worked as a teacher, school administrator, legislative assistant, Grants Officer for the Carnegie Corporation, and was Director of Education for the Children's Defense Fund. In 1981, she received her Ph.D. in education from Stanford University, and in 1982 completed a postdoctoral fellowship in psychology also at Stanford. She has published widely in journals and books.

Full Transcript (short version)

My name is Diane August, and I'm a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics, which is located in Washington, D.C.

Vocabulary is very important because it is key to reading comprehension, and English language learners are notoriously poor in reading comprehension. So, if you look at the research literature, you'll find that second language learners do very well on word-level skills, like decoding and spelling, but they do very poorly on the text-level skills, like comprehension and writing. So, we really need to think hard about how to develop vocabulary in these students, because only in doing this will we improve their reading comprehension.

What do we know about effective vocabulary instruction? I'd like to frame the answer to this in terms of a recent way of conceptualizing vocabulary instruction, and what successful vocabulary instruction looks like. That is that it really is multidimensional, specifically having four components. So, you need to explicitly teach individual words. You need to give children vocabulary in a rich context. You need to help build word consciousness, and you need to give them strategies for learning new words. That's the framework.

I also want to say that there are various things you need to think about when dealing with second language learners. For example, you need to think about what background knowledge they have and what language and literacy skills they have, both in their first and second language.

What we know is that the same factors that are implicated in the development of vocabulary in first language learners, in monolingual English speakers, for example, are very similar to those implicated in the development of vocabulary for second language learners. So, the frequency of exposure to certain words predicts the amount of vocabulary children will learn. Vocabulary presented in rich contexts generally is important in terms of children acquiring word meanings for those words. The number of words that children are exposed to makes a big difference, too, in the vocabulary they

acquire. So, all these things are similar for first and second language learners.

Issues for second language learners include that they come to school with much more limited vocabulary [in a second language] than the children who are monolingual English speakers. Generally, children who come to school who are English speakers have about 5,000 to 7,000 words in their vocabulary, whereas English language learners—even if they are born in the U.S.—come to school with very limited amount of [second language] vocabulary. So that's the first issue. The more limited you are in vocabulary, the harder it is for you to use the language that you hear and the language that you read to learn new words. So, we've got to figure out ways to really quickly increase the numbers of words that these children know and know deeply to make them even better at language learning. One issue is just that they are second language learners, and they come to school with a much more limited vocabulary.

As I've mentioned, vocabulary is critical in listening comprehension and reading comprehension, so we really need to figure out the best methods for developing vocabulary in second language learners. These children need to comprehend the text they are reading and to understand the language around them to succeed in school.

Full Transcript (extended version)

My name is Diane August, and I'm a senior research scientist at the Center for Applied Linguistics, which is located in Washington, D.C.

Vocabulary is very important because it is key to reading comprehension, and English language learners are notoriously poor in reading comprehension. If you look at the research literature you'll find that second language learners do very well on word-level skills like decoding and spelling, but they do very poorly on the text-level skills like comprehension and writing. So we really need to think hard about how to develop vocabulary in these students, because only in doing this will we improve their reading comprehension. And then, of course, reading comprehension is important because it is instrumental in helping children learn what's presented to them in classrooms, either orally or through reading itself.

One other thing that's really important to think about is that children who don't understand the text that they are reading, don't understand the text, but in addition it's difficult for them to learn new words from the text. So poor vocabulary leads to poor vocabulary because children can't take advantage of the text itself or what they hear to increase their vocabulary. So you need to really give

them a good basis in vocabulary to help their oral comprehension, their reading comprehension, and their ability to take advantage of school.

I also want to say that there are various things that you need to think about when you're dealing with second language learners. For example, you need to think about what background knowledge they have and what language and literacy skills they have, both in their first and second language.

With regard to background knowledge, for example, it's much easier for children to learn words if they have the concept that that word is related to than if they don't because then really all they have to do is learn a new label. So if they have the concept, and they have the word in their own language, then [in] learning a second language you just learn a new label.

However, for a lot of children, especially children from poor backgrounds or with poor and interrupted schooling, they may lack the concept for the word also; and so you really have to teach the concept and the label, which is much more difficult.

I'm going to talk first about teaching individual words, and we really have slightly different strategies depending on the age of the child. We've been working in a district in South Texas teaching individual words prior to reading children's stories; we're reading rich children's literature—narrative text—or we're actually [also] using science texts that are aligned with the district's science curriculum.

What we do is we choose keywords from the story to pre-teach. We pre-teach very few of these words because it take a lot of sitting still for the kids to go through this exercise; but we also see this not just as important in teaching these particular words, but it gives children semantic links, so to say, to other words and concepts. It's a way really to get kids talking about words and you build their language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge this way. And we teach three kinds of words; we teach what we call keywords. These words are important to the kids in terms of helping them understand the story. They are words that have a lot of depth of word meaning, so they tend not to be concrete but have nuanced meaning; they're the Tier 2 kind of words that Isabel Beck talks about.

Isabel Beck has done a lot of work examining how to develop vocabulary in children. She has published a book called Bringing Words to Life, which talks a lot about different methods to develop vocabulary in children of different ages; and a lot of the ideas that we have used in our work have been borrowed and adapted from Isabel's work.

We [also] teach basic words. These are words that English language learners are unlikely to know, but monolingual speakers are likely to know—for example, rooms in a house, kinds of furniture, names of

fruits and vegetables, and things like that. We try to pick a theme that's tied to the story to figure out which basic words to teach. We also teach things like other words and phrases, and these are words that are very important for understanding connected text—adverbs and adjectives and idioms. For example an idiom, near and far—what does that mean? Or even once upon a time. Words like slowly, quickly, nearly; words that connect different propositions like: thus, so, because, however, but—we try to teach these words explicitly to children.

I'm going to give you some examples of what we do. We find pictures that we use because we learned that just giving children, trying to give the kids a definition of the word without a visual is very difficult for them to really know what the word means. So I'll show you the picture but the first thing we do is we say the word in English. We give a simple definition in English; then we say the word in Spanish, define the word in Spanish; then we show a picture that contextualizes the word. Then we explain the word's meaning through the picture; then we show the children another picture and ask them to do partner talk, where what they do is they talk with each other to try to explain why the picture demonstrates that particular word meaning.

I'll give you an example. This is the word bold. And after we did what I just told you, we'd say to the children, "Let's look at a picture that demonstrates the word bold—this person."—and we do a lot of pointing here so the kids understand what we're talking about—is bold." He is jumping with a parachute, which means he is not afraid of doing risky things. So then we'd show the children another picture and we would say, "Turn to your partner and talk about why this picture [picture of a girl wearing a snake] demonstrates the word bold;" and then they would share that information. That's an example of how we teach vocabulary. Then we'd have the children repeat the picture.

In terms of some of these basic words I was talking about, this is an example. Here's a picture of tomato slices, and the way we would teach this is say, "This is a picture of tomato slices. Tomato slices are pieces of tomato that are cut with a knife. People put tomato slices on sandwiches and salads. When you cut a tomato into slices it looks like this." And one thing I didn't say is we use a lot of motions with the kids to keep them involved, so we'll say, "Let's all pretend to cut tomato slices. Remember we only use a knife when we are with an adult."

This is just an example, but what's interesting here is we're not just doing the word tomato; we're doing the word tomato slices, and here we have a picture of celery stalks or an ear of corn or a head of lettuce or a clove of garlic.

Each week with these young children—now we're in second grade; we work with first grade children also—we're teaching about eight to ten keywords and about ten basic words.

I should say also in teaching individual words, you can't teach all the words children don't know when you read a story to them. So we pick other words that are key to the story and we use the word "or" in the context of reading. So we'll say the word, we'll use the word "or", and we'll give the children an easier word for the word that's a little bit more complicated.

We use slightly different methods with older children. For example right now we're working in sixth grade science classrooms trying to teach children very technical vocabulary, as well as academic vocabulary that cross-cuts different subject areas. So what we've done here is we've given the kids glossaries to use, and for both the technical words and the academic words, we have the word, we have a definition of the word both in English and Spanish, and we have a picture for those academic words, that really explains the word meaning. So it's similar to this but it's in the form of a glossary. And the children as part of their homework are supposed to generate sentences, new sentences that use the academic word they've learned. So they're slightly more independent, but again, we're using visuals; we're using two languages, and we are helping children learn a lot of academic and technical vocabulary this way.

The technical words, I should say, in science are really taught in the context of teaching science. It's very hard to learn vocabulary in the subject area such as science unless it's taught in context. But to help the children review the words, we give them a glossary again, and what's special about the glossary is that, for one, we don't use a textbook definition. We go back to the book and try to create an explanation for the word that's a lot easier to understand. We also provide children with a definition in Spanish, their first language, which will help them with the word meaning.

Another important method of teaching vocabulary is through teaching children strategies to learn words. So in some examples from our own work, we had a cognate intervention that we implemented in South Florida with third and fifth graders, and what we really wanted to do is teach children to become aware of cognates. An issue for children is they may actually have the cognate knowledge but not know to use it. If children come from a language background that shares many cognates with English, then they have a great resource to draw on. Cognates are words that are written more or less the same in both languages, sound more or less the same in both languages, and have more or less the same meaning in same languages.

Examples: Magnificent in English; magnifico in Spanish. Cruel in English; cruel in Spanish.

So if children have these words in their first language, especially in their reading vocabulary, they can use this knowledge when they read in English.

We're still doing research to determine whether children who don't read in their first language and just have the word in their first language oral repertoire can draw on this knowledge when reading in a second language, or whether they really need to be literate in their first language to draw on this knowledge when reading in a second language.

Cognates account for between one-half and one-third of all words in a language, which is about 10,000 to 15,000 words. Children, who actually are literate in their first language, have a great resource to draw on when they're reading in a second language. Now there is a caveat here: for cognates that are technical in nature, it's unlikely that the kids are going to have that cognate in their first language either, unless they have solid schooling in their first language. So you'll have to teach the children what the word means before you give them the label for that word.

We did exercises where we made children aware that there were such things as cognates. For example, we would pair the children and have them read a passage and ask them to underline all the words that were cognates. We would give the kids a list of words that were cognates in Spanish, and they would need to write the words next to the Spanish cognates in English, so the English counterpart of the Spanish cognate. Then we'd ask the students to circle the letters that were different between the Spanish and the English word to make them aware that sometimes words didn't look exactly alike; there were differences. We did a similar thing with sounds—because sometimes the words don't sound exactly alike—where we would have the English and the Spanish cognate and have the students work in pairs to rate how alike or different the word sounded. And then finally we'd give the children a passage form their own textbook and ask them to find cognates in English, and tell us the word in Spanish. This was in South Florida, so a lot of the children spoke Spanish as a first language. But we do these similar activities in places like Fairfax, Virginia, where one of the ideas is to give children who normally are the ones that are struggling a little more authority in the situation so that the fluent English speakers really have to go to the native Spanish speakers to get help in doing this particular activity—because they don't know both the Spanish and the English word.

The cognate intervention was done with third and fifth graders. The Vocabulary Improvement Project was done with fourth and fifth graders. [In the Vocabulary Improvement project] we taught children to try to infer meaning from context. Now, there are not many words where you can actually infer the meaning from context, but we would read the children a passage that included the keywords for the week—they were supposed to raise their hands when they heard the keyword—and then for those keywords where you could use the context to support the word meaning, we would ask the students to work in pairs and try to tell us what they thought the word meant by the context in which the

word appeared. And the next day what we did in terms of using context to figure out word meaning is we'd give students sentences where the keywords were the answer to those sentences, but it was the context of the sentence that told children which word fit into the blank. So again, kids were looking at the context trying to use the context to figure out what word went into that blank.

But we're very clear with students that it's not often that you really use context; you can use context to sort of begin to narrow down what a word means sometimes. Sometimes the context doesn't tell you anything about a word meaning, and sometimes it gives you a pretty good clue. But those are just a couple of examples of strategies that we've taught children to use in terms of learning what words mean.

When children hear a lot of other language around the word, it gives them a lot of clues as to what that word means, and that's sort of connected to depth of word knowledge because words have lots of meanings and this is partly because the same word can mean different things. For example, the word bug has lots of different meanings in English, and there are lots of words that are like this, that are polysemous words. But in addition, words have nuanced meaning. The same word can mean slightly different things depending on the context in which it's used. Let me give you an example. Barry McLaughlin has a great example about pianos, and by using the word piano in a slightly different context you mean slightly different things about the word piano. For example, if you were to say, "I love to listen to piano music," piano has a different connotation than if you say something like, "If I sit on a piano, it might not be good for it." In the one instance you're thinking of pianos and keys and making music, and in the other you sort of visualize the piano and what it looks like and what it's made of.

Only when children hear words in rich context do they come into contact with the words in these different sort of environments, so to speak. And only this way do they really learn the multiple meanings of words.

As I've mentioned, vocabulary is critical in listening comprehension and reading comprehension, so we really need to figure out the best methods for developing vocabulary in second language learners. These children need to comprehend the text they're reading and to understand the language around them to succeed in school.